

Testimony

A Pamphlet from Pax Christi Texas

Anticipating May 9, 2021

Communications with the editor should be sent to j6anthonyblasi@yahoo.com. Pax Christi International was founded in 1945 with the encouragement of Bishop Pierre Marie Théas of Montauban, France, by Marthe Dortel Claudot, as a Christian lay organization dedicated to preventing a repetition of the savagery of the twentieth century's world wars.

Editorial

After the calendar, the Sunday Liturgical Reading reflections are based on readings for the Sixth Sunday of Easter. Tom Keene's poem is *Connected*. For more of Tom's poems, see <http://www.tomkeeneandthemuse.com/index.php>.

Tom read recently in the press how the official lobbyists of the Catholic Church in Washington were trying to persuade members of Congress not to designate any services or recognition—not even a suicide hotline—for sexual minorities, popularly indicated with the acronym LGBTQ. Since we were both safely vaccinated against COVID 19, I was visiting him to give him a copy of a recent book on San Antonio congregations that I had dedicated to him, and we were discussing the news reports about the lobbying being conducted in our name. Tom suggested that the text of an address he delivered in 1996 might be looked at again. It follows the poem.

Calendar

[Times are given for the Central Time Zone.]

Monday May 3, 11:30am-12:30pm (12:30pm-1:30pm ET) webinar "The Frontlines of Peace: An Insider's Guide to Changing the World," discussion of the book by that title by Séverine Autesserre (Columbia University); discussants are Autesserre, Laurie Nathan (University of Notre Dame), and Rachel Sweet (University of Notre Dame). Register at:

https://notredame.zoom.us/webinar/register/8016179754403/WN_8cKwP2eVRvmNdO1snRG_Gg?utm_source=sfmc&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=5.3.2021+Event+Severine+Autesserre+Invite+1&utm_term=https%3a%2f%2fnotredame

.zoom.us%2fwebinar%2fregister%2f8016179754403%2fWN_8cKwP2eVRvmNdO1snRG_Gg&utm_id=482224&sfmc_id=16334564

Monday May 3, 8:00pm (7:00pm Mountain Time) Pax Christi El Paso online meeting. Discussion of ch. 5, paragraphs 154-197 “A better kind of politics,” from *Fratelli Tutti*. Contact Pat Delgado for the link: phdelgado3583@gmail.com

Tuesday May 4, 11:30am-12:30pm (12:30pm-1:30pm ET) online conversation on Islamophobia, Asma Uddin (author, *The Politics of Vulnerability*) and Judd Birdsall (Georgetown University). RSVP at: https://georgetown.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_Xt6jX97_SG-mPC4gHGQbvg

Tuesday May 4, 8:00pm-10:30pm, screening of *I Am Greta* (Thunberg), followed by a panel discussion: Tatiana Claire (Climate Action Santa Monica), Mica Williams (Climate Action Santa Monica), and Ngozi Chukwueke (City of Santa Monica). Register at: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/i-am-greta-online-screening-and-panel-discussion-registration-148271677579?utm-medium=discovery&utm-campaign=social&utm-content=attendeeshare&utm-source=strongmail&utm-term=listing>

Saturday May 8, 11:30am-1:30pm, webinar “A Costly Failure: Why the Death Penalty Must be Abolished,” Robert C. Boruchowitz (Seattle University), Nicole C. Brambila (investigative journalist), Peter Collins (Seattle University), Edward Ray Keith, Jr. (public defender, Lubbock, Texas), and Diane Lozano (Wyoming capital/public defender’s office), moderated by Rick Halperin (Southern Methodist University). Register at: https://amnestyusa-org.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_MeefAYniTEKGTQf6Sv7A0Q

Monday May 10, 6:30pm-7:30pm, online “Jesus and Muhammad: On Peace, Forgiveness, and the Golden Rule,” Craig Considine (Rice University), \$10.00; register by May 3 at: <https://sourceoflightsa.org/classes-and-events>

Wednesday May 12, 7:00pm-8:00pm, online panel discussion on the documentary *The Years of Fierro*, about a Texas death row inmate for four decades who was released last year. First view the video at: <https://www.theyearsoffierro.com/>, free from May 7 to May 21. Once you sign up to watch it, you will receive the link for the panel discussion, which will include

Santiago Esteinou (filmmaker), attorneys Sandra Babcock and Dick Burr, and César Fierro, moderated by Professor Ana Otero (Thurgood Mashall School of Law).

Saturday May 15, 10:30am-11:30am, online “Dr. King’s beloved Community: Where Do We Go from Here—Chaos or Community?” Bishop Trevor Alexander, \$5.00; register by May 7 at: <https://sourceoflightsa.org/classes-and-events>

Saturday May 15, 11:00am-3:00pm (12:00pm-4:00pm ET), online Care for Our Common Home Catholic Conference, Bishop John Stowe OFM Conv (Diocese of Lexington, Pax Christi USA Bishop President), Bishop Robert McElroy (Diocese of San Diego), José Aguta (Catholic Climate Covenant), and Francis Rooney (U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See 2005-08), Member of Congress 2017-21); with breakout sessions. Information and registration at: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/ccl-2021-catholic-conference-call-to-action-to-care-for-our-common-home-tickets-149371232377?aff=efbeventtix>

Monday May 17, 7:00pm-8:00pm, online “Public Virtues: Rediscovering Civic Engagement,” Brandon Metroka (University of the Incarnate Word) and Judith Norman (Trinity University), \$7.00; register by May 10 at: <https://sourceoflightsa.org/classes-and-events>

Friday July 30-Saturday July 31, 49th anniversary Pax Christi USA conference, online. Keynote Speaker: Olga Segura, author of *Birth of a Movement: Black Lives Matter and the Catholic Church*. Conference mass presider: Bishop John Stowe, OFM Conv. SAVE THE DATE

Notices

Statement of Bishop Mark Seitz and other religious leaders against the Texas bill that would allow carrying guns without a license:

https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/2021/04/21/el-paso-bishop-mark-j-seitz-other-religious-leaders-oppose-bill-would-ease-carrying-guns/7325792002/?utm_source=elpasotimes-Daily%20Briefing&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=daily_briefing&utm_term=list_article_headline

Article on Capital Punishment: “The death penalty was never intended to give Black families like mine so-called justice,” by Martin Luther King III, *USA Today*, April 17, 2021. Access at: <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/opinion/policing/2021/04/17/mlk-iii-what-we-can-learn-virginia-ending-death-penalty/7226921002/>

Article on Voter Suppression: “Georgia’s new voting law is an affront to Catholic social teaching,” by Kathleen Bonnette. *America, the Jesuit Review*, April 20, 2021. Access at: https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/04/20/georgia-voting-law-catholic-social-teaching-boycott-240474?pnespId=jbE1oPpVBlKNnzAgweLvRKggtR8J4gaGBJDoBOB6&utm_source=piano&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=9050

Second Reading (1 John 4:7-10)

This is the well-known “God is love” discourse. The author, Presbyter John, repeats this insight in order to trivialize any consideration that might come between people. He was writing to some representatives of a Christian congregation that another congregation had declined to accord customary hospitality.

Sixth Sunday of Easter (John 15:7-17)

Last week’s reading presented the similitude of the vine and the branches. The gospel reading for this Sunday is a continuation of that discourse, and it can hardly be understood without relating it back to the image of the vine and branches: “If you remain on me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you wish and for you it will come to be.” In the teaching of the Johannine school that created the fourth gospel, petitionary prayer is not a matter of using God to get one’s own way but of fashioning one’s own wishes with the words emanating in Christian revelation, in a spirit of *agape*, a unifying but not uniforming love.

It is the presence of passages of this kind in the fourth gospel that leads to our associating it with the author of the letters of John, and to our referring to it as the *Gospel of John* or *Johannine Gospel*. For example: “This is my command, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

There is a tendency to reduce faith, or trust in God, to obedience or observance of commands and regulations. This gospel makes a point of quelling

that kind of impulse and going beyond it: “I no longer call you slaves because slaves do not know what their master is doing; but I called you friends because everything I heard from my Father I made known to you.” The disciple is not a slave, a mere instrument of a master, but one who has been empowered by an imparted insight and who is expected to develop that insight further and, of course, use it.

Poem

Connected

Mom and Dad
who connect us to DNA of ancestors
stretching back through
mammals and vertebrates to
origins of life on planet Earth,

making us all in relation to all,
that in our illusions of separation,
nudges us to say and pray:

Let it be,
let it become.

Tom Keene and Muse
April 1, 2021

Liberation Theology and Dignity¹

Tom Keene

Introduction

It is a recent fact that biblical scholars have discovered that the ancient word, Hebrew, comes from an older word, *a'biru*. *A'biru*, they say, designates not so much an ethnic or tribal entity as a class, an economic status. It refers to the marginalized of the ancient world: those impressed into the infantry and road building gangs, the landless nomads, the tenant farmers, the migrant laborers, the homeless. So, the story of the Bible and the God of the Bible is one that comes from the marginalized of the world. The story tells of a God who meets these wanderers and slaves at the margins of ancient society and leads them out of oppression to lives of dignity.

Another fact, only seemingly disconnected, is that students in liberation theology classes are sometimes asked: If Jesus were to minister to the outcasts and the despised of today as he did 2,000 years ago, whom would he go to and who would gather around him? One of the answers given most quickly and frequently is persons who are LGBTQ.

What is liberation theology?

Liberation theology is nothing more than the story of the Bible. This article will recap the story in light of the theme of liberation and justice and then link that story to the struggle for dignity by LGBTQ.

The central event of the Jewish scriptures is the Exodus. *A'birus*, Hebrews, find themselves among the landless and the enslaved. Moses meets the God of these marginalized people and receives orders to liberate them. Upon their liberation the Hebrews are given to understand that their freedom and well-being, (though not their everlasting covenant with God) is conditional. The condition is that as they come into the power of nationhood they must not be like the other nations of the ancient Near East. Their wealth must not come from the exploitation of migrants, landless laborers, orphans and widows. In fact, since

¹ Keynote speech for the DIGNITY Regional Conference, San Antonio, TX April 15, 1996. Dignity is an advocacy group of Catholic gays and lesbians. Published in DIGNITY USA JOURNAL Summer 1996

wealth tends to concentrate itself, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, the Hebrews develop a unique institution called Jubilee (Leviticus 25) where concentrated wealth is redistributed and indentured servants and slaves are liberated every fifty years. As the Hebrew nation indeed accumulates wealth, and the arrogance of economic power raises its head, the kings and nobility of the nation are scolded by prophetic voices that rise up from the common people and God: voices that speak truth to power and learn truth from the powerless.

The prophets remind the rulers and the people that their God-given nationhood is conditional to their doing justice. If Israel takes the path of other nations, creating wealth and property through war, slavery and economic exploitation, they will lose their land. If they sow the winds of empire, they themselves will inherit the whirlwinds of oppression. Indeed, this is exactly what happened. Assyria wipes out the ten northern tribes of Israel, makes them disappear from history. Babylonia captures the remaining two tribes, destroys the temple of Solomon, and sends the nation's nobility into exile. From that day forward, over 500 years before the birth of Jesus, until less than 60 years ago, 1948, Israel and the Jewish people have lived without national sovereignty. But they have not lived without hope. The covenant between them and the God of the marginalized is an everlasting agreement, God always reappearing in history, leading the people to freedom and dignity.

The hope of Israel envisions a Day of the Lord, when the Messiah will inaugurate God's reign of justice for all. This Day of the Lord is described in the last book and last chapter of the Jewish scriptures where the prophet Malachi (4:1-2) envisions the coming reign of God's justice for the hungry and powerless.

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven. All the proud who do injustice will be like stubble. The day that is coming will burn them up. But to you who respect my ways, the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in his wings, and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves.

For Christians, the central event in our scriptures is the clash between Jesus and his followers on the one hand and the violent powers of the political and religious establishments of that time. According to history, that clash ended in the death of Jesus. According to the Christian scriptures, and the faith of Christians, that clash continues because the liberation of humanity from dehumanizing domination by the political, religious, economic and cultural "powers that be" is *the* ongoing task of God and the People of God. That task is the subject of daily petition in Christian prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." God's

will for God's kingdom on earth is a reign of justice and love that displaces the current status quo. Currently, in keeping with the priorities of our world economy, every hour of every day over 1,000 children on this planet die of malnutrition despite the fact that there is more than enough food to go around for everyone. We will know that God's kingdom has come when no child lacks for food, shelter, medical care, education and dignity.

Liberation theology is nothing more than that vision thought out and systematized that we may integrate that vision into our daily decisions and lifestyles. Liberation theology is nothing more than the discernment of God's preferential option for the poor all the way from Abraham and Moses to Jesus and Paul, from the beginning through to today and into the future of all humanity.

It is significant that the Christians who oppose liberation theology are also those most impervious to the rights of sexual minorities and to the rights of any who are marginalized from the centers of power. It is also notable that these are the Christians who see Jesus simply as their personal savior who guarantees them a ticket to heaven. In their ego-bound worry over personal death and personal judgment, they cling to a status quo that disregards the bottom line of the gospel.

We find that bottom line in Jesus' parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25. This story portrays an opposition between those who serve the "powers that be" and those who serve the powerless. Those who serve the powerless are the ones who are familiar with the presence of God. Those who serve the powerful, the kings and rulers, the "powers that be," those who kiss the boots of worldly power, do not recognize the presence of real power, the power of God, even when they meet it face to face.

In the parable, those who attended to the powerless, the hungry, the sick, prisoners, strangers, discover that they were actually encountering and attending to God. Those who attended to the "powers that be," the political rulers, the rich and famous, those in authority, were ignoring the presence of real power, the power and presence of God.

Here is a lesson that makes it utterly clear that *the* condition for personal salvation is social solidarity with the marginalized, the powerless. This solidarity requires an effort to keep from being co-opted by the "powers that be." It requires a preferential option to serve the powerless.

The term, "powers that be" comes from Paul's letters to the earliest Christians. He uses that term, along with *principalities* and *dominations*, to refer to the domination system of institutions and dehumanizing forces that hold humanity in bondage to fear and violence.

Opposed to these “powers that be” is the gospel of Jesus and the liberating presence of God’s Spirit among us. These powers are seen as originally good and created by God. They are also fallen along with the rest of humanity in our submission to ego driven fears and reactive violence. These powers are also, along with the rest of humanity, redeemed by the clarity of God’s preferential option for the poor. Given the liberating power of resurrection and Pentecost in human history, the “powers that be,” the entire domination system that Paul refers to as the “cosmos,” are doomed to be converted, destined to be restored to service rather than continue their domination, fated to serve the commerce of love.

The liberating power of resurrection and Pentecost.

What resurrection does for liberation is to announce that God is not on the side of Pilate and Caiaphas, not on the side of Pharaoh or the slave holders, not on the side of the political and religious establishments that would control our lives at the cost of freedom and truth. It is significant that Jesus does not make his resurrection manifest to Pilate and Caiaphas, or to the soldiers who crucified him. Rather Jesus appears first to the most powerless of his followers: the women. And among the women, first to Mary Magdalene who recognizes the resurrected Jesus by the way he speaks her name. In other words, the truth and power of resurrection are available only to those who believe, those who trust that God’s healing presence is among us and working.

Resurrection faith is to know, as lovers know, that God is with us. God’s justice and love are the stuff of the universe, and that stuff is working to put back in order the disorder of the established powers and dominations: which are good, fallen and redeemed. Such faith is not accessible to those who put their faith in the domination system and its assumptions. Among those assumptions are that the need to control society requires that some must dominate others; that men are better equipped to dominate than women and some races are naturally suited to dominate others; that violence is redemptive, that violence is the only language enemies understand; that money is the most important value, etc.²

Our faith-driven certitude about the resurrection of Jesus, ourselves, and all humanity gives us a peaceful confidence that the loving non-violent power of God will convert us and all humanity from our addicting fear of the “powers that be,” our fear of the violence they may do to us.

² On this and the biblical insight on powers, see Walter Wink’s *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Fortress Press, 1992).

This resurrection certitude was challenged among the first followers of Jesus when he left them to return to the Abba/God to whom all of us must also return. He told his followers to wait in the upper room for the coming of God's Spirit. The night before he died he told them that unless he left them the Spirit could not come to them. The reason for this is that as long as they clung to the resurrected body of Jesus they could not experience the fullness of God's Spirit. For no single thing, no single experience, can communicate the fullness that is God, not even the resurrected body of Jesus. So the Spirit comes then in the forms of fire and wind. What are the forms of fire and wind? Fire and wind take all forms and are beyond all forms. Henceforth Christians must look for God's presence and power in all places and all situations and all conditions. No longer can anyone confine the presence and power of God to that which the political and religious establishment's control. God is free and so are we. That is the liberating meaning of Pentecost.

At Pentecost the one God was revealed in many languages. Today that Spirit continues to take all forms and to flow beyond all forms, into all languages and, indeed, all sexual orientations, to reveal one God as non-violent love and freedom. That too, is the liberating meaning of Pentecost.

All this has certain implications for Dignity as an organization and as a support community.

Our being is of God

Paul's declaration, "By the grace of God I am what I am" serves to affirm the love God has for us. We be as God made us: gay, lesbian, bi or straight. That being is God's gift, God's grace to us. And in the final sense of our growing completeness in God, that Being is the ground of our being. By the grace of God, we are what we are and our being is, as God pronounced on the first day of creation, "good." "By the grace of God, I am what I am and God's grace has not been in vain." (1 Cor 15:10)

We are a prophetic community

Dignity is and can continue to be a prophetic community. Our prophetic word is that to be human is to be sexual. To be Christian is to express that sexuality in a context of agape/love, a love that is total and unconditional. Such a love is to be judged by God according to the standards set by Jesus: "A new commandment I give you. Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). The function of the prophet and the prophetic community is to speak truth to

power and to learn truth from the powerless. Gay and lesbian communities find themselves discredited, discounted, and disrespected by our current domination system, marginalized by the prevailing “powers that be.” It is from the dis-empowered that the voice of God’s cry for justice is to be heard. It is from the people of Dignity that this voice of the voiceless shall be heard. Like Archbishop Oscar Romero, we are the voice of the voiceless, the dis-empowered, the disrespected, the discounted, the discredited. We learn truth from our own experience, our own dis-empowerment and that of our community, and we speak that truth to “the powers that be,” knowing that such truth shall make us free, all of us, oppressed and oppressors alike.

We are a faithful community

Being what we are, we find ourselves confronted by a society seeped in a tradition of hetero-sexism that is so engrained as to be invisible to all except to the victims. We may feel overwhelmed by such power, intimidated by the gay bashing and its promotion by demagogues, both societal and ecclesial. Can our struggle for dignity succeed against such odds? Yes. But God does not call us to be successful in our time. God calls us to be faithful: faithful to one another, faithful to ourselves, faithful to the wellbeing and common good of our society. We can do no more. But we do it knowing that God is with us at this cutting edge of history as God carves out a new civilization based on agape/ love. As Jesus reminded us, one person sows the seed, later, other persons reap the harvest.

We are faithful, because like Archbishop Romero, we believe in resurrection. Before his assassination, Romero pledged to his people, “If they kill me, I will rise again in the hearts of my people.” Our faithful struggle to be faithful to God, to ourselves, to our community, and to love our enemies is founded on our faithfully going with Jesus daily: different dyings demanded, repeated resurrections reassured.

We are a community of conscience

It is the experience of some of us, whether we be heterosexuals or homosexuals, that lovemaking, the sexual expression of agape, can be, indeed, often is, a grace filled, God encountering experience. Faithfulness to that experience is an intrinsic part of our fidelity to God. To deny God’s presence in our love experience is to deny God in that part of our lives. That would be a sin against the Holy Spirit, a sin against conscience. When the Priests Senate of the Archdiocese of San Francisco set forth a pastoral plan on ministry and

homosexuality, it recalled the words about conscience from Vatican II's Constitution on the Church: "Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There one is alone with God whose voice echoes in one's depths." Our fidelity to our experience is one with our fidelity to God's self-revelation in our lives. Dignity strives for that fidelity.

We are a Spirit seeking community

We know that the incarnation of God's love takes all forms and is beyond all forms. We know that no "powers that be" can define for us where God is and where God is not in our lives. We know through our experience that God's Spirit is working in ways tortuous and queer. And we have chosen to be faithful to the authority of that experience, the authority of God's Spirit, in whatever forms we are graced.

We are a Catholic community

We recognize the unique role of Dignity in insisting on fidelity to both the experience of homoerotic love and one's experience of the Gospel in a context of Catholic heritage. Universal or catholic truth is both our heritage and our calling, both our journey and our destiny. Thus, we do not have-not the luxury, as other gay and lesbian rights groups may have the luxury, of limiting our advocacy to the rights of gays and lesbians. Our Catholic heritage of liberation-for-all holds us accountable to go with Jesus in the Holy Spirit along the road to God's coming reign of liberation, justice, and agape/love. This means we advocate for all who hunger for justice. This means that we will be catholic in our advocacy. This means we will not allow the "powers that be" to divide and conquer the marginalized, the dis-empowered, the voiceless, no matter what payoffs they might offer our marginalized community.

We are a community of hope

The chaos of the world, with its hunger, cynicism and gay bashing, is the raw material out of which God-with-us creates order, creates a new order that is God's reign of justice on earth, a "new heaven and a new earth" (2 Peter 3:13, Rom 8:21 and others).

Blessed are we who are persecuted for having hungered and thirsted for The Day of Justice, for we shall have our fill. We shall see the reign of God's justice on earth and we are seeing it as we lay the seeds. We make tomorrow different because we make today different. We make tomorrow more just because we

make today more just. Like Archbishop Romero, when we call for justice we are the voice of the voiceless. And though they may kill us, we will rise again, to struggle again, in the hearts of our community.

Links

Pax Christi International
<http://www.paxchristi.net/>

Pax Christi U.S.A.
<http://www.paxchristiusa.org>

Pax Christi Texas
<http://www.paxchristitexas.org>

Pax Christi Dallas
<http://www.Paxchristidallastx.org>

Pax Christi San Antonio
<http://www.paxchristisa.org>

Marianist Social Justice Collaborative
www.msjc.net

Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, International JPIC Committee
<http://saccvi.blogspot.com/>

San Antonio Peace Center
<http://www.sanantoniopace.center>

Texas Catholic Campaign to End the Death Penalty
www.txccedp.org

Dialogue Institute of San Antonio
www.thedialoginstitute.org/san-antonio/

Climate Change
www.creation-care.com

Catholic Books Review
<http://catholicbooksreview.org>